FRAN SONTAG

MS. SONTAG: My name is Fran Sontag. I don't have anything really new to say, but I just want to say some of the same things because I feel strongly about them. I'm concerned about so many questions which are not answered adequately. For instance, the cost of this project was estimated first at $28.8 billion. The most recent Department of Energy budget documents have the cost at $43.6 and I heard somebody today mention a number $30 billion. This is not unusual or unprecedented for a government project, but it definitely does not lend credibility to governmental estimates and I'm afraid this may be even more true of the scientific estimates involved in the project. The scientific estimates are more controversial and complicated by nature. 1

Now, these scientific aspects or projections or estimates are exactly the part which are of greater concern to me. I'm not really that concerned about the cost overruns, but about the safety. It's my understanding that the irradiated fuel rods that you want to ship out to Yucca Mountain will continue fissioning or that are fissioning right now will continue giving off radioactive gases, and I wonder will these gases not build up inside the casks during the transportation process. This fissioning will continue forever, and I'm wondering about gases caused by radiolysis if any residual water comes in contact with the casks and radiation zaps that water, the water molecules break down into hydrogen and oxygen and possibly could cause an explosion of hydrogen gas. This would cause damage to the cask or whatever is supposedly holding this radioactive material at bay and it could have a lot of pressure put on it from within over time. 2

I would like to get back to my original concern about the load producing slowly but gradually increasing amounts of radioactive gases in transport. These gases, I think, are called noble gases because they do not react with other chemicals, but they cannot be filtered and they do break down into other long-lived radioactive materials eventually, and if these gases are inhaled, they can give off radioactive particles within our bodies which will still be emitting radiation, and that's the same stuff that doctors target very specifically to kill cancer cells and they make a patient very ill in the process. And I don't like the idea of this radiation floating around loose in our environment and/or entering parts of our body at random or being in the food and water we ingest. All of these are very real possibilities, and in my mind, probabilities.

I would like you to picture this from the inside out as we're talking about the proposal to transport it out to Yucca Mountain. The material you propose to transport is "spent" uranium pellets, many of which are fractured to an almost dust-like consistency and this material is spent because it's no longer financially viable or profitable in the reactor, but it's still very radioactive and fissioning and will be for a long, long time. It's encased in damaged metal holders, rods, or whatever they're called, coverings, and that's in bad shape, too, from being in use quite a while. These are enclosed in less than perfect casks and yet you propose to transport thousands of such dangerous and unstable loads all across the country regularly over a period of 30 years and expect us to believe there won't be any accidents, and that doesn't even include the unfairness to the people who live closer to Yucca Mountain. We're worried about it passing through St. Louis and we're not, according to this proposal, going to have it in our back yards.

MR. BROWN: One minute remaining.

MS. SONTAG: Perhaps we should insist that the folks that create the nuclear waste figure out how to live with it closer to their own back yards. I would like you to follow that no-action plan and do the best we can to contain it safely where it's being created and include in the concept of no action stopping further production immediately or as soon as possible. It just seems like we're trying to get rid of something that just won't go away, so let's stop producing it. 3